Population surge state's biggest yet

By Brandon Loomis The Salt Lake Tribune

More people than ever before moved to Utah last year, at the same time that Utah moms celebrated a record wave of babies. The population grew by 10 people every hour, state officials say. And if you have driven bumper-to-bumper on Interstate 15 or Bangerter Highway lately, you can guess where the newcomers are moving. Salt Lake County and Utah County both cracked population milestones last year - 1 million and 500,000 respectively - and demographers say the areas near their mutual boundary are the state's growth engine.

"Ground zero this decade seems to be southern Salt Lake County and northern Utah County," said Mark Knold, chief economist for the Utah Department of Workforce Services.

The overall result is a record statewide population swell of 84,425 - roughly a new Ogden - in the 12-month cycle that ended in July, according to an annual report approved Thursday by the Utah Population Estimates Committee. The state grew by 3.2 percent to nearly 2.7 million residents, the committee of state economists, local and utility officials and university demographers agreed.

The previous high growth, in 2005, was 78,159.

A big factor in the continued growth was job creation out of whack with the nation's. Americans are moving to Utah in part to build homes and businesses for the ever-expanding pool of native Utahns who come of age for work and home ownership, said Knold, one of the committee members.

"There's an incentive for people to come this way," he said. Job growth here has approximated 4.5 percent at the same time it's hovered near 1.5 percent nationwide.

"The internal need of the 20-year-olds produces the demand for houses. People moving in supply the labor," he said.

In all, 44,252 people moved to Utah during the 12-month period, eclipsing the previous high of 40,647, set in 2005. Job creation would have sputtered if outsiders hadn't swarmed the state, Knold said, because the local labor force has been stretched during a period of roughly 2.5 percent unemployment.

Births rose to 53,953, the 10th record in the last 11 years thanks in part to the state's 1980s-era "echo boomers" growing up and parenting a second echo of the Baby Boom, experts said.

The population estimates rely on an averaging of housing construction, school enrollments, Internal Revenue Service deductions and Mormon church records.

In the latest report Utah County took over the top spot from Washington County in terms of percentage growth. The state's second-largest county grew by 5.5 percent - or roughly 26,000.

Salt Lake County, meanwhile, grew at a 2.3 percent clip. That's 22,530 people, a number that is smaller than Utah County's growth not just by percentage, but in total.

The zones near where the two counties meet are the hot spots, University of Utah research economist Pamela Perlich said, in part because that's where the land is available for housing. People seem willing to endure longer commutes to buy new homes there, she said.

Committee members also noted a regional ripple effect from job growth in the Lehi area.

Washington County, the state's previous per-capita growth leader anchored by sunny St. George, grew by 4.5 percent. The area may have overbuilt its real-estate stock while it was drawing on off-the-charts growth in nearby Las Vegas, Perlich said.

Now that Vegas has slowed, so has its Utah satellite. But more than 4,000 people still moved in from elsewhere, and Washington County now numbers roughly 141,000.

St. George real estate agent Gail Moore said her experience corroborates the report of a slowdown in Utah's Dixie - though 4.5 percent growth is hardly slow.

"People are having to come down on their prices," so that most sales now are in the \$200,000 to \$300,000, Moore said. "It's not what it used to be, but things are still moving."

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